

ELSAH HISTORY

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The Character of A Village

The impression visitors get on arrival at a new place is mainly decided by what they first see and feel. What they see is the material expression of the spirit of those living and working there. This creates a character of place, which decides what the visitor will feel.

People coming to Elsah are also welcomed by a combination of these factors. In the case of our village the tangible expressions, the structures, streets and squares with their plantings, date mostly from the 19th century, with here and there an overlay representing late 20th century life. The spirit, or character, of the place becomes evident in the human activities of the Elsahites. Character is not a given static fact, it is a living process. It makes up the everyday environment. Fortunately there still is an inter-relationship between the 19th century architectural surroundings and the present living patterns of the Villagers.

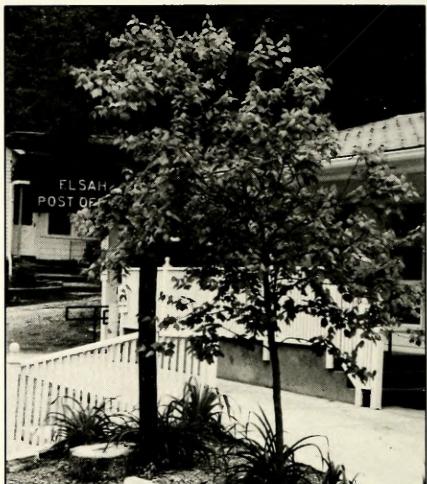
Thus visitors to Elsah still find a Village Character, as expressed in a certain grace of life and a harmony of shapes. The community appears relaxed and natural the way it fits in its landscape, and it seems to have always been there.

There are very few villages, if any, as perfectly preserved and contained, and yet lived-in as Elsah, and we who choose to live here—who herited it, as it were are actually only custodians of it. And custodianship implies responsibilities. These responsibilities include the preservation of both our homes and public buildings, the plantings along the streets and squares, and the support of traditional community life. In the past years Villagers have given ample evidence of their acceptance of these responsibilities.



Artwork by James K. Schmidt

The Great Flood of 1993 put the Village to test. It was a question of survival, a question of accepting State funded help, and work very hard to rebuild—or, as some communities did, just take the funds and let go. Here the true character of the Villagers came through—they rebuilt! An upcoming newsletter will focus on the rebuilding and restoring of the homes. Though the residents of Elsah have always been active in the preservation of their homes, and in the restoration of their public buildings through the support of the Historic Elsah Foundation and their Village Government, it became evident that this community truly valued the beauty of its Village after the 1993 flood. The restoration of the flood-damaged buildings was, and still is, done with the utmost of care and devotion. While individuals restored their homes, the Historic Elsah Foundation accepted the responsibility of rescuing Farley's Music Hall and returning it to its former Community Center self, and the Village Government focused on needed landscaping and replanting on public land.



*The newly planted Lyon's Choice Elm
at the Post Office.*

The flood not only damaged structures in the Village, but it also destroyed many trees. Some died, while others, seemingly having withstood the water, suddenly fell during 1994 November storms. (See Elsah History #67). All in all the Village lost between twenty and thirty trees on both public and private property. Many of these trees, lining the streets, were tall old maples or cottonwoods and sycamores that had matured to their full growth. The disappearance of so many natural features has dramatically changed the “look and feel” of the Village. A true village needs the tall, mostly vase shaped visual anchors along its streets. The interplay of the trees and the structures behind them makes the streetscape more three dimensional.



A truncated tree.

Photo: Jeri Lewitz



*The tree in front of the Evans House suddenly fell
in one of the two 1994 November storms.*



The Village looking rather bare.

Fortunately Elsah's Board of Trustees is very aware of the importance of the trees to the Village Character. As part of its Tree Planting Plan it consulted with Rich Nester of Belleville, an arborist, and Shear Artistry Tree Service, whom the Southern Illinois Extension Service had recommended, for assistance in identifying potential problem trees. Several trees were soon cut down, to be replaced, leaving the Village looking rather bare and naked. It was a sad sight seeing the large trees first truncated, then further cut down and finally made to completely disappear when Steve Godfrey removed their stumps. The Village had lost some old friends, and as Joyce Kilmer (1886-1918) wrote in a poem called Trees,

*I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.*

Kilmer ends it, four couplets later with...

*Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.*

With advice from the Greenery in Godfrey and the Principia Biology Department on "appropriate trees and suitable locations," the Building and Grounds Commission of the Elsah Village Board embarked on an extensive replanting project. The plan could practically redesign the Village if not carefully handled. To show how delicate this project is: One problem the commission encountered was the increased traffic patterns on the Elsah roads, which requires it to choose more "urban tolerant" trees (such as the Lyon's Choice Elm at the Post Office), and sometimes change the

placement of trees to the inside of fences, on private property, rather than alongside the curb. Care has to be taken to preserve the simplicity of the Village Character, and plan "generous and noble trees" (*The Anatomy of a Village* by Thomas Sharp).

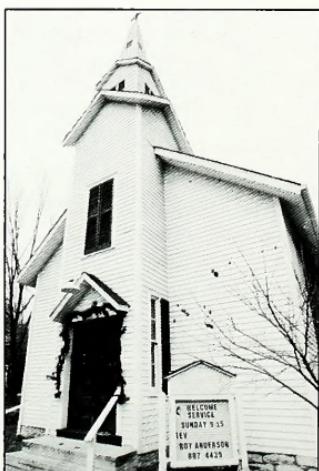
This replanting plan is an ongoing effort, with slow growing results. But already one encounters new arrivals happily settling into their new environment, adding to the Village Character. As we all know, trees have souls.

As for the Community Activities, the Village Happenings, the Patterns of Life, or whatever one wants to call them, early December of 1995 proved that part of the Village Character is alive and well. There were some old-time happenings and some new ones, and some were happening again at the recently straightened and restored Farley's Music Hall. The event that brought the whole community together was the "Hanging of the Greens," a once-every-other-year event sponsored by the members of the Methodist Church.

This year's benefit was held on Saturday, December 2nd, from 3:00 until 7:00 p.m. Susan Young, who was in charge, together with a group of Hard Working Women, organized a terrific program, consisting of Musical Entertainment, a House Tour, a



The Methodist Church interior decorated for the "Hanging of the Greens"



The Elsah Methodist Church

*Photos: Margie M. Barnes
Courtesy: The Alton Telegraph*



The Jerseyville Show Choir singing in Farley's Music Hall, December 2nd.

Bake Sale, and a Fine Arts and Craft Sale. Eleanor Barnal, June Cronin, Marjorie Doerr, Jeannie Kisker, Pauline Bradley, Patty Taetz, Marie Oleson, and Sally Horbelt were some of these Hard Working Women—both old-timers and newcomers working together for a community goal.

The Village Board supported the event by providing police supervision. Historic Elsah Foundation decorated Farley's Music Hall for the Christmas season and offered free hot drinks. As Susan wrote in her thank-you note to all who helped make this a success, "It was great to see the whole town pitch in and work together toward a common effort. That special 'Elsah Spirit' really showed itself this season." There we are about that "spirit" again! The event "brought in a gross total of \$3,941.75 in the form of ticket sales, bake sale, crafts, carriage rides and donations. The money is going into the building fund and will go toward painting the church."

The musical programs were held in the Methodist and Christian Science Churches, as well as in, appropriately, Farley's Music Hall. Charmain Barnal, Kevin and Amy Wilson, Nancy Misgades, Gay Anderson, the Allen Singers and Dale Lockhard performed at the Methodist Church, while Lynn Conner, Gina Rogers, Susan and Emily Reynolds and Beth and Loren

Robertson, took care of the music at the Christian Science Church. The Jerseyville Show Choir sang some wonderful songs from the Lion's King at Farley's Music Hall, bringing back memories of "olden times" when the Hall served as the center of community activities. They all donated their time and talents.

While the Civic Center hosted the Fine Arts and Craft Sale, Farley's sported a large table with the most delectable home-baked goodies for sale. It also hosted an old-fashioned visit from Santa. Eight families opened their homes, giving visitors an early feeling of Christmas with their lovely decorated rooms. The Elsah businesses were open for those who chose to browse and/or shop. There were also carriage rides, romantically lit in the December dusk. And all along the weather was cooperating beautifully.

The next day, Sunday, December 3rd, Historic Elsah Foundation held a small recognition ceremony at Farley's for Village property owners receiving the "In the Preservation Spirit" award. These awards recognized property owners' special efforts after the flood—beyond the minimum requirements outlined in the Village of Elsah Historical Ordinance—to preserve and restore their historic buildings for future generations.

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The awards were given to The Principia for three of their Village properties along Mississippi and Mill Streets, Robert and Judith Doerr, Betsy and Henry Holt for their home and the frame house next door, Marcia and Bill Charlton, Julia Biesk, Richard and Peggy Ouderkirk, Sarah Batzer and Tim Jasina, Marjorie Doerr, Joanne and Jim Evans, Jerry and Patty Taetz, David Slusser, Randy Kinder, D. J. Stamm and Gino Dilorio, Richard and Rhoda Mesker, Dorothy Pendleton, Paula and Ned Bradley, and Eric and Susan Mack.

Special awards for Counsel and Advice were given to the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs, and to Jack Luer, a restoration architect. Jane Pfeifer, the Mayor of Elsah, and Melvin Starkey of S & M contractors received awards for their special interest and efforts.

To our great surprise, Mayor Pfeifer handed us, Historic Elsah Foundation, an award. This award is in recognition of the restoration of Farley's Music Hall and will have a special place in our "office."



David Pfeifer ready to serve Henry and Betsy Holt, Betty McIntire and Marjorie Doerr at the reception at Farley's, December 3.

Photo: Arno List

After the short ceremony Jane Pfeifer hosted a delightful reception right there, giving the recipients and others who attended a chance to visit and compare restoration notes and also to see what was accomplished at Farley's.

This event closed the 1995 season.



Village Friend Remembers Elsah

The board members of the Historic Elsah Foundation and the Village of Elsah are deeply grateful to the late Edwin McDow Neylon for his generous bequest of \$5,000 to the Foundation.

Mr. Neylon passed on October 26, 1994 in Bradenton, Florida, where he lived since his retirement in 1978. He was born in Elsah, in 1907, and attended the Elsah Elementary School until the family moved to St. Louis. As a young man he started working for the St. Louis Refrigeration Company (later called the Merchant Refrigerating Co.), and worked his way up to become the president of the business.

During World War II he served as captain in the quartermaster corps of the United States Army, and while in the service in Chicago he met his future wife, Leona Maas.

Edwin Neylon always kept in close touch with Elsah and his cousin, Nancy McDow.

When in St. Louis he and his family often visited, mostly on Sundays.

Later, after he moved to Florida, he still knew what was happening here through the H.E.F. publication "Elsah History" and newspaper clippings that Nancy regularly sent him.

One of the last issues he received was the 1994 issue on "The Great Flood of 1993" — which inspired his bequest.

It is fitting that this bequest, from an original Elsah citizen, enabled

Historic Elsah Foundation to restore the remarkable wall decorations in Farley's Music Hall, with which he was probably familiar.



As we all know, society is in a state of flux, of change, and so is Elsah. We only have to look at the long list of those we welcome to the Village and the number of houses for sale to realize how true that is. The Village Board recently put together a Welcome Package for newcomers to Elsah, letting them know the community is "glad they chose to live here." The package includes information about Elsah and a current Historic Elsah Foundation newsletter with an application to join HEF. In order to hold on to the Village Character we have to stay aware of its specialness. Yet, according to what is happening here, the Elsah Village Character appears to be doing well, and is blossoming.

Welcome To The Village

Elizabeth Ritter

12 LaSalle (Pauline Bradley apt / Maude Trovillion House)

Jennifer and John Waters

16 LaSalle (Eric Mack House)

Sharon Crafton and daughter, Caitlin

27 LaSalle (Rosa House)

Patty and Gary Fry

18 Palm (Felch House)

Julia Biesk

18 Mill (across from Green Tree Inn)

Debra & Dawson Woodward

69 Mill (rental; John Cronin House)

The Brothers Floyd

75 Mill (Butler House)

Mr. & Mrs. William Flatley

80 Mill (Nordeen House)

Mr. & Mrs. Kevin Hayes

90 Mill (Bross House)

Judy & David Spencer

117 Mill(Pauline Bradley House)

Houses for Sale

Helen and Gale Marler,24 Palm

Marcia & William Charlton, 7 Mill

D.J. Stamm / Gino Dilorio, 50 Mill

Barbara & Richard Butler, 75 Mill

Dorothy Pendleton, 2 Alma

Village News



Bob Denham behind the wheel on the big village tractor

As we went to press we were informed of Robert Denham's passing Friday, the 16th of February. Bob was as Elsah as one can be. He was born and raised here. He attended the Old School in Elsah, and after service in the U.S. Army during World War II, and a later job at Pere Marquette State Park, he came to work for the Village in the mid-seventies. He was hired by former Mayor Delby Darr as a maintenance worker, and worked for the Village for twenty years or more. There never was a happier man than Bob sitting behind the wheel of the big Village tractor, plowing early snow. We shall miss him.

The Foundation members offer Mrs. Janice Clayton their sincere condolences on the recent passing of her husband Randy Clayton. Randy liked living in Elsah and loved hiking in the wooded hills around.

The Village has cut down between twelve to fifteen trees, not all flood damaged, and replanted about a dozen. The messy looking little group of broken trees around the Gate Lodge is waiting for IDOT (Illinois Department of Transportation) to clean it up.

A Dietz Pioneer lamp (see Elsah History #67) was installed in front of Farley's Music Hall, and seven more in the church parking lot and along the "Creek Walk" connecting the lot with Mill Street.

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